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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001224

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/14/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: FERNANDO ARAUJO: LIFE AS A FARC HOSTAGE

REF: A. BOGOTA 00311
[1](#)B. BOGOTA 01218

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Former GOC Development Minister Fernando Araujo was kidnapped by the FARC in December 2000 and held hostage until his dramatic escape during a COLMIL assault last New Year's Eve (reftel A). In five hours of de-brief interviews with Embassy officers, Dr. Araujo described the guerrillas' treatment of political prisoners, his guard details, front movements, and defensive maneuvers when under attack. Araujo said the FARC had weakened markedly over the six years of his captivity. His account may be unique to the northern front which held him and hence not transferable to other hostage cases, especially any in southern Colombia. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On February 19, President Uribe announced the appointment of Fernando Araujo as Foreign Minister, replacing Maria Consuelo Araujo (no relation) (reftel B).

A Prized Asset, Handled With Care

[1](#)3. (C) Araujo was told that he was a valued asset, an "ace" for bargaining with the GOC, and his health and comfort were a priority. The only hostage held by the FARC's 37th front, he never saw or heard news of any other. He had a cordial relationship with the front commander, Martin Caballero, who asked for his help in translating electronics manuals and in teaching English. Although most FARC including Caballero slept on a bed of leaves on the ground, Araujo was afforded the relative comfort of a hammock. He was also allowed a notebook in which he kept a diary, a radio with which he followed national and world news, and whatever newspapers or magazines might reach the camp -- their local editions a clue as to his whereabouts. He was not permitted any tools that could double as weapons. In terms of health or comfort, his any concern was immediately attended to. His greatest struggle was with boredom, not mistreatment. The duty of care for hostages is an order in the FARC rulebook, he said. The FARC observe it conscientiously seeing it as a political message.

Unbound but Set Apart

14. (C) Araujo was not restrained, but his mobility was restricted. He was initially tied by a belt at his waist after he attempted to escape on the day of his kidnap, but after seven months in captivity he was never again bound or handcuffed. His face was never masked except near civilians, nor were his eyes covered except when passing close to landmarks that could reveal to him his location. Araujo normally wore civilian clothing. Occasionally when passing near a town or population he was dressed in a FARC camouflage uniform to blend in with the group. FARC members had two uniforms -- one in camouflage, the other a police uniform. Still, they often dressed as civilians when their uniforms were worn out, so street clothes would not necessarily set apart a hostage from captors. What did set him apart was that he was confined to one area of the camp, unlike everyone else who moved freely performing chores. He was also not allowed to join meetings or parties. This restricted mobility, advised Araujo, was the best criterion which surveillance teams could apply to distinguish a hostage in the midst of a camp.

Guards: Constant but Weak

15. (C) The guard watch over him was constant, he said rotating, in two-hour shifts. During most of the six years there was only one guard, but this was increased to two last October after President Uribe publicly advocated military rescue operations. On marches, Araujo was led by three guards in front and three behind. He was never able to separate himself, even for a moment. While his captors were kind and friendly, and Araujo tried to befriend them for his own self-interest, he remained always aware that they would kill him without hesitation if given the order. FARC members told him that among guerrillas there could be no real friendships for this reason. Surprisingly, given Araujo's importance as an exchange asset, his guards were not the front's most elite fighters. Instead they were often those who were sick, pregnant, or otherwise less able to perform regular duties. They would always be among the front's most trusted members, however.

Movements Among Camps

16. (C) Araujo referred to the FARC as nomads, a mobile corps continually shifting from camp to camp. The frequency of these movements increased with military pressure in the area and/or scarcity of water, decreasing at times of illness among the troops. In 2006, the front moved 26 times, or on average once every two weeks. Forces would move out of a camp at any time of day, or by night when the moon was bright. Distances between camps ranged from three to ten kilometers (which Araujo estimated by counting his paces), and movements lasted one to three days. The front kept its distance from the civilian population. Araujo never encountered adjunct militias, but the front used local campesino guides who knew where mines were laid on the trails. Advance teams were also sent ahead in areas of risk. The entire front marched in an organized file, in a mandated order by company, on foot without mules or vehicles. FARC members were loaded down by twenty extra pounds of cargo over and above their weapons, ammunition, and personal belongings. In tough terrain where the climate was hot and water scarce, marches were difficult. Rest stops were frequent, and day marches could last from one hour to eight hours, limited by the pace of the slowest member.

FARC Disciplined, COLMIL Not

¶7. (C) The FARC would "erase" camps and trails as it left them, spreading grasses and leaves in their wake to prevent their traces from being detected by air. Trash was buried in the ground. They were similarly very careful with smoke from their cooking fires, which they believed that U.S. surveillance would detect. Rare visitors, like emergency doctors would be led to the camp in relay fashion by a chain of guides, so that no single person would know the entire route from town to camp. Visitors would normally be kept on the camp periphery. Similarly, when moving camps even the FARC's own rank and file did not know the final destination. Marches were conducted in silence, except for a roll call up and down the line, relying on hand signals to communicate the presence of enemy or civilians. By contrast, guerrillas scoffed at what they considered to be poor COLMIL discipline. The front often knew the positions of COLMIL troops, who traveled loudly in groups of 12 to 20 and left behind footprints and trash.

Vigilance and Vulnerability

¶8. (C) The FARC was normally quite vigilant for overhead aerial activity. Guerrillas recognized aircraft types by sound and had nicknames for each. Sentries eavesdropped on pilots' radio conversations to determine directions and targets. Araujo said Caballero also received tip-off calls from air bases - although it is unclear whether he meant from inside infiltrators or from FARC militia posted outside runways. When a plane or helicopter was heard, an alert was raised. All then remained silent and took cover under trees. If an aircraft came closer, the front dispersed to a radius of about 500 yards in all directions to avoid being a concentrated target. Araujo noted that moments of greatest vulnerability were: 1) while breaking up camps; 2) at the exhausted end of long marches; and 3) during downpours, when guerrillas huddled under tarps and were unable to see or hear much but the rain. The front's guard was even lower during weekly 'culture time,' from six to eight on Sunday evenings. During such sessions the guerrillas were distracted by drinking, flirting, dancing, and loud music. Rifles were confiscated when guerrillas were drunk.

Military Pressure

¶9. (C) Military operations in the 37th Front area of Bolivar department were continual, said Araujo. The FARC believed that COLMIL offensive capabilities and U.S. technology were very advanced. When attacks were most intense, the hostage was separated from the front in a small guard company, to avert injury or escape. Araujo stressed that every hostage case was different (by type of front, number of hostages and guards, terrain, etc.). Hence, the lessons from his experience could not necessarily be applied to other prisoners. In his own case, "military rescue for me was a valid option." Although devastated by the news of fellow political hostages killed during COLMIL rescue operations, Araujo still supported the attempt, saying "I always wished they would rescue me." As for his captors, they never blamed or punished him for casualties suffered at the hands of the COLMIL. They differentiated him from the war and told him the fighting was not his fault.

37th Front: Weakened and "Worried"

¶10. (C) Reflecting on the changes he had seen in the 37th Front over the course of the last six years, Dr. Araujo said COLMIL attacks had taken a heavy toll on the FARC. "At the moment they have no capability. They are beaten up, diminished. That is, the guerrilla that I knew six years ago, they're much more affected now. Many of the guerrillas I knew died or have been captured. Many have also fled." Araujo described Caballero as a genuine revolutionary,

inspired by Castro and Chavez, who believed the FARC would win but was dismayed by the reality of its decline. COLMIL had not only weakened the front materially but also had scarred it psychologically: "I want to insist on one point. In September 2005 we were completely surrounded (by the COLMIL). (The FARC) put on music and joked about it all. But that was also part of their psychological reaction....Clearly they feel afraid. The worry is permanent."

DRUCKER